

Chapter 11

Memorial on Buddhism

Han Yu

A Conflict of Values: Buddhism in Late Tang China

Chinese Buddhism reached its high point of popularity and influence during the early years of the Tang Dynasty. Buddhist monasteries and sects proliferated, and the Tang imperial court often patronized Buddhism in one form or another during its first two centuries of power. However, because so many aspects of Buddhism were at variance with the traditional culture of China, especially Confucian values, conflict was almost inevitable. One of the leaders in the Confucian counterattack on Buddhism was the classical prose stylist and poet Han Yu (768-824), who in 819 composed a polemic against Buddhism. Presented as a memorandum, or *memorial*, to Emperor Tang Xianzong on the subject of the emperor's veneration of a relic of the Buddha's finger, Han Yu's elegant and witty essay so enraged the emperor that initially he wanted to execute the author. Eventually, the emperor contented himself with banishing his impudent civil servant to a frontier outpost.

Questions for Analysis:

1. How does Han Yu imply that emperors who have espoused Buddhism have lost the Mandate of Heaven?
2. Which aspect of Buddhism most repels Han Yu?
3. In Han Yu's mind, what are the social, cultural, and political dangers of Buddhism?

MEMORIAL ON BUDDHISM

Your servant submits that Buddhism is but one of the practices of barbarians which has filtered into China since the Later Han. In ancient times there was no such thing. . . . In those times the empire was at peace, and the people, contented and happy, lived out their full complement of years. . . . The Buddhist doctrine had still not reached China, so this could not have been the result of serving the Buddha.

The Buddhist doctrine first appeared in the time of the Emperor Ming¹ of the Han Dynasty, and the Emperor Ming was a scant eighteen years on the throne. Afterwards followed a succession of disorders and revolutions, when dynasties did not long endure. From the time of the dynasties Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, and Wei,² as they grew more zealous in the service of the Buddha, the reigns of kings became shorter. There was only the Emperor Wu of the Liang who was on the throne for forty-eight years. First and last, he thrice abandoned the world and dedicated himself to the service of the Buddha. He refused to use animals in the sacrifices in his own ancestral temple. His single meal a day was limited to fruits and vegetables. In the end he was driven out and died of hunger. His dynasty likewise came to an untimely end. In serving the Buddha he was seeking good fortune, but the disaster that overtook him was only the greater. Viewed in the light of this, it is obvious that the Buddha is not worth serving.

When Gaozu³ first succeeded to the throne of the Sui,⁴ he planned to do away with Buddhism, but his ministers and advisors were short-sighted men incapable of any real understanding of the Way of the Former Kings, or of what is fitting for the past and present; they were unable to apply the Emperor's ideas so as to remedy this evil, and the matter subsequently came to naught – many the times your servant has regretted it. I venture to consider that Your Imperial Majesty, shrewd and wise in peace and war, with

¹ Han Mingdi (57-75 CE)

² Five fairly short-lived dynasties of the troubled fourth through sixth centuries. The Wei, who were foreign conquerors, apparently used Buddhism's universal message as an ideological buttress for their rule.

³ Literally "high (or great) ancestor," an honorific title bestowed posthumously on several Chinese emperors. This high ancestor was Li Yuan, the first Tang emperor.

⁴ The Sui Dynasty (581-618) reunited China in 589 and began a period of expansion that some characterize as the Second Chinese Empire (589-ca. 755).

1 divine wisdom and heroic courage, is without an equal through the centuries. When first you came to the
2 throne, you would not permit laymen to become monks or nuns or Daoist priests,⁵ nor would you allow
3 the founding of temples or cloisters. It constantly struck me that the intention of Gaozu was to be fulfilled
4 by Your Majesty. Now even though it has not been possible to put it into effect immediately, it is surely
5 not right to remove all restrictions and turn around and actively encourage them.

6 Now I hear that by Your Majesty's command a troupe of monks went to Fengxiang⁶ to get the
7 Buddha-bone, and that you viewed it from a tower as it was carried into the Imperial Palace; also that you
8 have ordered that it be received and honored in all the temples in turn. Although your servant⁷ is stupid,
9 he cannot help knowing that Your Majesty is not misled by this Buddha, and that you do not perform
10 these devotions to pray for good luck. But just because the harvest has been good and the people are
11 happy, you are complying with the general desire by putting on for the citizens of the capital this
12 extraordinary spectacle which is nothing more than a sort of theatrical amusement. How could a sublime
13 intelligence like yours consent to believe in this sort of thing?

14 But the people are stupid and ignorant; they are easily deceived and with difficulty enlightened. If
15 they see your Majesty behaving in this fashion, they are going to think you serve the Buddha in all
16 sincerity. All will say, "The Emperor is wisest of all, and yet he is a sincere believer. What are we
17 common people that we still should grudge our lives?" Burning heads and searing fingers by the tens and
18 hundreds, throwing away their clothes and scattering their money, from morning to night emulating one
19 another and fearing only to be last old and young rush about, abandoning their work and place; and if
20 restrictions are immediately imposed, they will increasingly make the rounds of temples and some will
21 inevitably cut off their arms and slice their flesh in the way of offerings. Thus to violate decency and draw
22 the ridicule of the whole world is no light matter.

23 Now the Buddha was of barbarian origin. His language differed from Chinese speech; his clothes
24 were of a different cut; his mouth did not pronounce the prescribed words of the Former Kings,⁸ his body
25 was not clad in the garments prescribed by the Former Kings. He did not recognize the relationship
26 between prince and subject, nor the sentiments of father and son. Let us suppose him to be living today,
27 and that he comes to court at the capital as an emissary of his country. Your Majesty would receive him
28 courteously. But only one interview in the audience chamber, one banquet in his honor, one gift of
29 clothing, and he would be escorted under guard to the border that he might not mislead the masses.

30 How much the less, now that he has long been dead, is it fitting that his decayed and rotten bone,
31 his ill-omened and filthy remains, should be allowed to enter in the forbidden precincts of the Palace?
32 Confucius said, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep away from them."⁹ The feudal lords of ancient
33 times, when they went to pay a visit of condolence in their states, made it their practice to have exorcists
34 go before with rush-brooms and peachwood branches to dispel unlucky influences. Only after such
35 precautions did they make their visit of condolence. Now with out reason you have taken up an unclean
36 thing and examined it in person when no exorcist had gone before when neither rush-broom nor
37 peachwood branch had been employed. But your ministers did not speak of the wrong nor did the censors
38 call attention to the impropriety; I am in truth ashamed of them. I pray that Your Majesty will turn this
39 bone over to the officials that it may be cast into water or fire, cutting off for all time the root and so
40 dispelling the suspicions of the empire and preventing the befuddlement of later generations. Thereby
41 men may know in what manner a great sage acts who a million times surpasses ordinary men. Could this
42 be anything but ground for prosperity? Could it be anything but a cause for rejoicing?

43 If the Buddha has supernatural power and can wreak harm and evil, may any blame or retribution
44 fittingly fall on my person. Heaven be my witness: I will not regret it. Unbearably disturbed and with the
45 utmost sincerity I respectfully present my petition that these things may be known.

46 Your servant is truly alarmed, truly afraid.

⁵ By the second century CE, a polytheistic Daoist Church, which practiced congregational worship, preached physical immortality, and used drugs and magic to achieve that immortality, had emerged as a significant force.

⁶ A western city.

⁷ Han Yu.

⁸ The legendary pre-dynastic Sage Emperors.

⁹ From *The Analects* (source 21).